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Challenging Collaborations: Local Musicians, Local Academics and the Scholar From Abroad

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“Fieldwork is the most personal task required of the ethnomusicologist”. This is a quotation by Helen Myers (1992:21) and it describes in a nutshell the core of this paper. When conducting fieldwork, we as ethnographic researchers cannot remain anonymous academics who merely exist through our written texts or within the realm of the academic ivory tower. When conducting fieldwork, we are first and foremost human beings, private people, who involve with the musicians and dancers we study, and we encounter our informants as partners on an equal eye level. As Bruno Nettl puts it in his introduction to Barz and Cooley’s *Shadows in the Field*:

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“[O]ur informants-consultants-teachers become part of our family; or even more likely, we become part of theirs”. (2008:vii)

These personal relationships form the basis for conducting serious ethnomusicological research. In my view, they are the only solution against elitist behaviour on the side of academia, and the only way to prevent exoticisation of ‘the other’ - whoever that may be.

However, in the course of my involvement with musicians and revivalists in Cornwall, I have become highly critical towards the idea that the researched musicians must always be right when it comes to personal opinions, convictions or narratives that are shaped by socio-political and cultural circumstances. The problematic discrepancy between our desire as ethnomusicologists to “give voice” to our participants and the fact that at the same time these participants’ experiences might be in line with certain ideologies, has been addressed by Harris Berger in 2008. In his investigation about the relationship between music and politics, he states:

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“To act as though people cannot misunderstand their own experiences is ultimately to dehumanize them by deifying them, to deny their capacity to grapple with the complex realities of social life” (2008: 73).

In Berger’s view, “neither the scholar nor the research participant is an infallible observer of social life”, and he proposes that - and I quote - “the richness of experience requires dialogic methods in ethnography” - unquote.

I this paper I apply this - what I see as the ‘ethnomusicologists’ dilemma’ - to my personal research experiences in Cornwall. I reflect on the complex relationships that I encountered as an academic researcher and as a private person within the conflict field of Cornish local musicians, Cornish academics and my home base at the University of Bern, Switzerland.

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When I first became involved with the Cornish music and dance revival in 2008, I did not yet consider myself an ethnomusicologist. I was a graduate student in English linguistics and ethnomusicology and had come to Cornwall in order to improve my English and in order to take a brake from academia. However, my job as a German language assistant teacher at a secondary school turned out not to be very demanding, which is why I started to become involved with various Cornish local communities and became a member of the Cornish dance team *Asteveryn* and the fiddle group *Bagas Crowd*.

The Cornish musicians and dancers were very welcoming and I was fascinated by the numerous Cornish festivals, the lively music sessions in local pubs and the thriving dance nights, where fun seemed to have the greatest priority. Later I started to learn the Cornish language - one of the six revived varieties - and became more aware of the political aspects of Cornish life. I was told that the Cornish were a Celtic minority whose culture and language had been forbidden for centuries by the Anglo-Saxons, and that Cornwall actually was not part of England but constituted its own little nation within the UK, similar to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I was shocked by this seemingly injustice and started to dress in black and gold - the Cornish colours -, carried the Cornish flag with pride and decided to support the Cornish through the tools available to me, which is academic writing.

Therefore, in 2011, I handed in a seminar paper on the Cornish music revival at the University of Zurich, which from my present point of view, was highly Celto-centric and clearly spoke the language of the Cornish revivalists. To give you an example, this quote stems from the introduction to my seminar paper:

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“The Cornish people find it hard to define and defend their Celtic identity and to distinguish themselves from the English: for example, compared to the other Celtic regions like Ireland, Scotland, Brittany and Wales, whose Celtic languages as well as folk music were never entirely lost, [...], Cornwall still struggles to be acknowledged as a region with an independent Celtic character and heritage”.

(Hagmann, 2011, unpublished)

This seminar paper was generally well received by the Cornish musicians. Only one issue proved difficult:

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The Cornish revival scene is split in two distinctive groups: **CLICK** the early revivalists, who modelled Cornish music and dancing on Irish and Scottish ceilidhs, **CLICK** and a second wave of revivalists, who around the year 2000, decided to follow rather the Breton example of the music and dance nights *Fest Noz*, and created a similar event for Cornwall called *Nos Lowen* ‘happy night’. In my seminar paper, I had suggested to fuse the more Breton sounding *Nos Lowen* music with the more Scottish-looking ceilidh-dances - an idea which was sharply rejected by both revival movements.

Due to my love for Cornwall and after having completed my MA in Zurich, I decided in 2013 to write my PhD thesis on the Cornish music and dance revival. Still convinced of my political engagement for Cornwall, my project description stated:

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“By exploring and examining the Cornish Folk Music and Dance Revival as well as the *Nos Lowen* movement, the present PhD thesis aims at filling a significant gap in the scientific field of Celtic Folklore Studies as well as the Anglo-American folk music research in general, and at raising international awareness of it.”

(And here I have to mention that the link to Anglo-American folk music was a suggestion by my supervisor. I had initially only mentioned the Celtic Studies.)

I conducted most of my expert-interviews the same year, 2013, and, although being aware of the fact, that both revival-groups (the early revivalists and the creators of *Nos Lowen*) were eager to convince me of their interpretation of Cornish music, the fact that Cornish music constitutes an independent Celtic music genre, through which the Cornish people have managed to maintain and demonstrate their Celtic distinctiveness from English music, remained for me an unquestioned reality.

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More so, this assumption seemed confirmed when, in 2014, the Cornish were officially declared a Celtic minority by the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, a recognition which was based on Cornwall's - and I quote: "proud history, unique culture, and distinctive language" - unquote.

However, only a year later, my opinion changed drastically. As a former linguist, I had always remained slightly doubtful about the revivability of a once extinct language, bearing in mind that language always constitutes much more than words and grammar. However, when I analysed the music and dance material of the Cornish revivalists, I was shocked to find out that the basis of 90% of this material proved to be of pan-British origin, but was consciously changed in the course of the revival, in order to look and sound more what one imagines as 'Celtic'. This is a process I call 'Celtification' and I use this term for the purposeful imitation of the Celtic cultures in a kind of 'occidentalism'. 'Celtification' stands in opposition to 'Celticisation', the natural process of acculturation, which I argue, is long lost in Cornwall.

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Extra-musical traces of Celtification in Cornwall are thus pictures on CD-covers that connect to the romanticised 'Celtic imaginary', (such as standing stones, stone-crosses, legendary figures such as King Arthur or Tristan and Iseult, natural spirits and the imitation of the Gaelic script) and the use of Celtic inspired costumes, such as the Cornish kilt or the depiction of Celtic knotwork.

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Intra-musical Celtification seems even more striking: As you can see here, the song 'The American Stranger' was found all over the UK during the first British Folk Revival. The Cornish version was collected by Sabine Baring-Gould.

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However, in the course of the Cornish revival, one of the core-revivalists, and the only academic who has hitherto written a PhD on Cornish music at the Institute of Cornish Studies, intentionally changed this major tune into the mixolydian mode and substituted the English text with a neo-Cornish translation. Additionally he put this song into an entirely Cornish context in his introduction, so that all pan-British traces are brushed under the carpet. 'The American Stranger', or *Estren*, as the revivalists re-translated it, is just one example of many that show how a Cornish musical distinctiveness was consciously created during the 1980s and 1990s.

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This discovery had a major impact on me as a private person and as a researcher. I realised that going back to my Cornish informants became a challenge for me. Knowing what they expected from me, namely that I was able to confirm their Celtic identity based on their musical distinctiveness, I found it difficult to share my discoveries. Was I allowed to question the uniqueness of their musical identity? Was I allowed to question even their status as a Celtic minority? Would I put myself in the uncomfortable position of questioning the authenticity of Cornish music from an elitist academic point of view? And did this make Cornish music less valuable? I suddenly became very aware of my etic role as a Swiss and felt guilty even of researching the music and dances of Cornwall as a non-Cornish native, a concern that researchers at my home university in Bern could not understand.

Thus, in the years 2015 and 2016, I returned numerous times to Cornwall. I realised that writing from home was one thing but that going back to the field was another and even more important thing. I felt I needed to find myself sitting in the middle of a Cornish music session and asking then the question: Is this ‘authentic’ Cornish music?, rather than asking the same question at my writing desk.

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The question about ‘authenticity’ was something I could not ignore because at home, I was part of a project entitled ‘Theory and Practice of Authenticity in Global Cultural Production’. But questioning ‘authenticity’ itself became important. Was ‘authenticity’ only based on the originality of a source or was it also possible to experience something as being ‘authentic’, knowing that its origin had received many conscious alterations since?

Of course I was able to deconstruct such claims as this Internet entry:

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“Cornwall has historical folk music tradition [sic] that dates back to early Celtic times and has survived to present day [sic]”.

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On the other hand, I could not disprove a claim like this one, formulated by the Cornish revivalists of the *Nos Lowen* fraction:

“It is [our aim] to celebrate the Cornish way of life and the traditions that help ensure the involvement, development and the future of traditional Cornish Music. We use Cornish traditional music to celebrate our distinctiveness and diversity. Our vision is that through our work there will be a growing awareness, understanding and ownership of this music in Cornwall”.

I became aware of the fact that for me only the concept of ‘multiple authenticities’ made sense, a term I developed based on an idea by philosopher Denis Dutton.

However, going back to the field, I also realised that even though I had found a satisfying solution for my authenticity dilemma, I could not explain such ideas to the majority of my Cornish folk musicians. I discovered that the etic-emic distinction, if such a dichotomy really exists, was not a question of being Swiss, doing fieldwork in Cornwall, but rather of being an academic working with folk musicians of various social backgrounds. Therefore, I decided to discuss my concerns differently with Cornish people who had an educational background and with those who had not.

This decision made it easier for me to express my sincere love for Cornish music with the Cornish musicians in a pub session context and to fervently sing along in songs like: *Cornwall My Home*. At the same time, if collaborators were really interested in my research and asked me questions like: “What actually is Celtic music?” or “How old is our music?”, I would rather meet up with them in their private homes for lengthier discussions. These conversations often seemed to have an impact on Cornish musicians.

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The group *Dalla*, for instance, recorded one of the Celtificated Cornish songs, the Aeolian version *An Awhesyth*, in its original major mode with English words on their latest Album and listed it under its commonly known title *The Lark*. **PLAY**

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As it often happens in music revivals, many of the initiators of the revival - the ‘burning souls’ as Owe Ronström calls them - often come from a well-educated and usually academic background. This rule also applies to the revival in Cornwall. Many of the core revivalists are thus attached to academia, mostly at the Institute of Cornish Studies, where they nourish the

narrative of Cornwall's musical distinctiveness and flatly reject any alternative voice. These people, I found, were in a position that allowed me to address issues such as 'invented traditions', 'conscious manipulation of the sources' and 'Cornish nationalism'.

The result being that I was only invited once to a small symposium at the Institute of Cornish Studies, which was on "Music and Identity". I have never been invited since. However, my presentation clearly must have had an impact on some of the local researchers.

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This Wikipedia entry on Music in Cornwall, for instance, which I had questioned during my presentation, changed only eight days after the symposium.

I suddenly started to understand why only one person, the one who had initiated the Cornish Music Revival himself, had up to then completed a PhD on Cornish music. Two other musicians and revivalists who had started to write a thesis, both gave it up after two years only. I realised that writing a PhD on Cornish music at the Institute of Cornish Studies required writing in favour of Cornish distinctiveness. This is in line with an observation by German scholar Malte Tschirschky's, who analysed Cornish history, Cornish politics and Cornish literature. In his book *The Invention of the Nation of Cornwall* Tschirschky states:

Die Forschenden am Institute for Cornish Studies „bewegen sich [...] in einem Zwiespalt, da sie gezwungen sind, *a priori* ein Mindestmass an kornischer Differenz und quasi-nationaler Identität und Kultur und deren jeweiliger Kontinuität anzuerkennen, die sie dann untersuchen, was zu einem Konflikt von wissenschaftlicher Objektivität und ideologischer Überzeugung führen kann“ (Tschirschky, p. 222)

Scholars at the Institute of Cornish Studies find themselves in a dilemma: On the one hand, they are expected to accept a minimum of Cornish distinctiveness as well as an almost national Cornish identity and culture with on-going continuity, which they then research. On the other hand, this can engender a certain ideological conviction, which in turn conflicts with scientific objectivity. (My translation)

The question for me then became: Was it possible at all for local Cornish academics to write on Cornish music without being restricted by a nationalistic ideology? And luckily, the answer was: yes.

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In 2015, I got to know a Cornish PhD student, who has just recently defended her thesis on Cornish carols in the diaspora, at Cardiff University. Being herself Cornish but doing research in California and South Australia, she was somehow in a similar position than I was. I felt very thankful to discuss issues with her on Cornish nationalism, the invention of tradition and the problematic role some Cornish academics played herein without feeling too provocative. During the last few years we both started to present papers at different ethnomusicological conferences and due to our topic, we usually ended up on the same panel. (In fact, this is the first time I'm here without her). For me, this situation was a very good way of mingling and questioning etic and emic views: Me, being a Swiss academic, writing on Cornish traditional music, her being a Cornish academic, writing on Cornish traditional music in California and South Australia.

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To conclude, I believe that etic and emic are terminologies which are far more complex than the dichotomy seems to suggest. In my case, they were not based on geographic or cultural but rather on educational and/or ideological differences. Communication with the various collaborators in the field is essential but at the same time a highly delicate undertaking, which demands much sensitivity and remains flexible in each single situation. As researchers, we always have to remind ourselves that we are not invisible but that we always have a certain impact on the communities we research. In the end of the day, we are just people. And despite the fact that academia sometimes encourages us as scholars to use impersonal language (especially in the German writing tradition) or to completely disappear from the topics we present at conferences, I find it nevertheless important to constantly reflect on our role in the field.